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FM AMEMBASSY NIAMEY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5274
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NIAMEY 000619

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [KCOR](#) [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [NG](#)
SUBJECT: POSITIVE AND EXTENSIVE MEDIA REACTION TO U.S. PRESS
STATEMENTS ON NIGER REFERENDUM

Ref: a) Niamey 567 b) Niamey 515

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11. Summary: Coverage of the August 13 and August 17 press releases, respectively outlining the USG positions on the referendum in Niger and calling for the release of a leading opposition leader and a journalist, has been widespread and favorable in the independent print and broadcast media. (Note: A few contacts who learned about the statements from media reports contacted the Embassy to report inability to find them on the Department of State's main website. End note.) One strongly positive editorial last week connected the embassy's response with President Obama's speech in Ghana, commending the U.S. for its consistent support of the noble principle of democracy. The press releases may have provided a way for the independent media to more boldly voice their editorial position in a way that sheltered them from suspension by the government media regulatory authority, and may succor the beleaguered defenders of democracy in Niger. End summary.

12. Post distributed to local media outlets and posted on the embassy web site the August 13, 2009 statement which declared that the August 4 referendum to extend and expand the mandate of President Tandja is a setback for democracy, and the August 17 statement calling for the release of civil society activist Marou Amadou and journalist Abdoulaye Tiemogo (ref A), both accused of speaking out against the government. Coverage of these statements by the independent print, television, and radio media has been far-reaching and well-received. The controlled state-owned media has not responded publicly to the statement.

INDEPENDENT RADIO AND TELEVISION

13. The embassy statements made a big splash on domestic independent TV and radio. Dounia TV and Radio Group, a leading independent media voice, began airing the statements in full on Monday, August 17. Bonferey TV, an influential, mainly Islamic-oriented channel, whose director had just returned from an ECA-sponsored International Visitors Leadership Program, also broadcast the statements without additional commentary during the week of August 17. Anfani Radio featured the statements with supportive commentary, and nearly every major independent radio station joined in airing the complete statements, reaching a combined national audience estimated to be well over two million listeners.

INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS

14. Several major independent weekly newspapers featured the press statements in their issues of last week. Le Canard

Dechaine(circulation of about 1,000), a newspaper owned by the imprisoned journalist Abdoulaye Tiemogo, whose release was called for in the August 17 press release, printed the full August 17 press release with the embassy seal and letterhead on its front page, below the fold. Above the fold was a political cartoon in which figures representing the U.S., EU, and Demark were telling President Tandja, "No money without democracy." The complete text of the August 13 press release was printed without commentary on the back page of the same issue.

¶5. The credible and well-respected independent news weekly L'Evenement prominently featured the U.S. reaction in last week's issue. Ambassador Allen was given "thumbs up" in its weekly political barometer for the press statement against the referendum and her immediate dismissal of rumors that opposition leaders sought refuge at the embassy, which the latter said restored their honor by showing that they did not run and hide during the referendum. On page three, a bold headline read "The U.S. Says No" above an editorial that began by praising the U.S. reaction to the referendum for being the most muscular in the international community and closed with a quote from President Obama's speech in Ghana that "Africa does not need strong leaders, but needs strong institutions." The editorial commented on how the reaction of the U.S. had quieted the doubts of those who, until recently, questioned the ability of the international community to influence the situation. This contrasts with an article on the same page which criticized the irresolute official post-referendum French response, which has effectively "poured cold water on the opposition."

¶6. La Griffe (independent weekly, circulation of about 1,000) quoted from the August 13 press release in an article on page three on the heating up of international reaction to the referendum. Le Democrate (circulation of around 2,000) also printed the August 13 press release on page five last week in an issue which led with a headline article criticizing the reluctance of France, the African

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Union, and ECOWAS to make unambiguous statements about the referendum.

Comment

¶7. Given the wide independent media coverage given to the press statements, the U.S. will be remembered by the population for its clear and constant defense of democracy and freedom of the press in Niger. The press releases may have provided a way for some independent media to speak out without incurring suspension in a media environment where the newly-autonomous media regulator (CSC) can shut down media outlets without warning for any reports deemed "threatening" to the state (ref B). The CSC would likely hesitate to sanction broadcasts of official USG press statements made available to all media outlets, both state-owned and private. As several of the more forthright editorials mentioned last week, the U.S. rejection of the referendum as undemocratic and the declaration of the consequences of the President's actions could encourage and empower the multitude who aspire to a peaceful restoration of democracy in Niger. End Comment.

¶8. Minimize considered.

ALLEN